

# Why Travel?

## Anthropology



### Introduction

Why travel? It seems obvious: to go the supermarket, the office, the football match. But long before there were supermarkets or offices or football games, people travelled broadly as much as we do now. There is 'more' travel in motorised societies, but only in miles travelled, within the time and money budget that has been stable through the ages. Does this indicate a need to travel as fundamental as our need to sleep, to eat? Travel has been a constant in societies: places are built to fit around our travel needs and work and social rituals allow, even require, the travel that is part of what it is to be human.

*Fundamental travel behaviour is stable across space and time.*

Andreas Schafer 'Regularities in travel demand: an international perspective'. (2000)

“

*Personal travel appears to be much more under the control of basic instincts than of economic drives. This may be the reason for the systematic mismatch between the results of cost benefit analysis and the actual behavior of travelers.*

Cesare Marchetti 'Anthropological invariants in travel behavior'. (1994)

*The discipline (of anthropology) is anchored to the seasonal and other forms of travel that are integral to pastoralist societies, routine movements associated with work and visiting kin, together with such historical journeys as those of imperial explorers and pilgrims.*

Tom Selwyn 'The political economy of enchantment'. (2007)

”

## Key Aspects

### Travel time has remained constant throughout history:

Evidence from across societies and ages shows we travel for just over an hour per day and spend about 10% of our expenditure budget on travel.

The mediaeval farm strip gave roughly the same walk journey to do a day's work as the rail or car commute gives today. Towns grew up about an hour's cart journey from several villages.

Travel varies between social groups and over our life cycle. Individuals have different travel budgets, just as we have different sleep budgets. At the aggregate level, though, travel budgets seem resilient.

People who work from home make extra local trips, suggesting we have a continuing desire to travel.

### The evolution of travel needs

Evolved gender roles still have echoes: a man hunting might take several days, will navigate by direction and take risks, creating tension; a woman fetching water takes a familiar route, navigates by landmarks and her journey is relaxed.

### Travel for territory

We know the right size paddock for a pony, or zoo enclosure for an elephant, but not how much territory people need to move around in. Living spaces are notoriously variable, from the standard 'third of an acre' in Sydney to the famously small flats of Tokyo.

Many of us were nomads until a few centuries ago, and many are becoming so again, with foreign travel, long distance commuting, and a declining sense of national roots.

Where ideas of territory are drawn tightly, it can lead to tribalism, social exclusion, violence and even to gang cultures.

### Defining our identity:

Why, when we want to protest, is our natural instinct 'to march'?

Travel compartmentalises our lives: we separate our life on the move from coming home again.

Travel for the human gaze: an old lady with enough food in the house will catch the bus into town just to get out and interact.

## Practical Implications

- **Understanding how our needs to move have evolved can lead to better design of public spaces and urban planning.**
- **Travel budgets have implications for how we decide what to invest in transport, and how we evaluate the effects of infrastructure. Long distance road and rail investment, for instance, encourages people to move further and faster within the same time budget. By contrast, good walking spaces create an 'invitation to linger' and increase footfall and rents in town centres.**
- **Is the case for the Free Pass for pensioners linked to the need for us to get out of our homes; would removing it have social care or health consequences?**

## Further Reading/Resources

Thor Heyerdahl, *Early Man and the Ocean: the beginning of navigation and seaborne civilisations* (1978)  
Fascinating introduction into the anthropological origins of long-distance human travel.

Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: its origins, its transformations and its prospects* (1968)  
Insights into how urban form has been affected by human movement throughout history.

Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (2010); also website: <http://gehlcitiesforpeople.dk/>  
One of the foremost thinkers on how public spaces and movement interact.

Richard Alleyne, 'Why women cannot read maps and men lose their keys', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Feb 2009.  
The anthropological background to modern gender differences

## Key Questions

**To what extent does transport planning affect our perception of place?**

**Is 'tribalism' a positive or a dysfunctional aspect of modern travel?**



INDEPENDENT  
**TRANSPORT**  
COMMISSION